Iris Kelso

The Stone movie

Oliver Stone, director of the "JFK" movie they're shooting in New Orleans, has a facile explanation for the way he plans to portray Jim Garrison and his trial of Clay Shaw for involvement in John F. Kennedy's assassination.

Sure, Garrison, the former New Orleans district attorney, is the dramatic focus of the film. But he's just a part of the big picture, says Stone. The director is not concerned with whether Clay Shaw was guilty or not. Nor is he concerned with Garrison's "mistakes."

Says Stone: "The question that we had as filmmakers is do we dramatize all the mistakes and show him (Garrison) in a realistic light, or do we in that time period, forget the mistakes and get on with the larger story, which is why Kennedy was killed, and how we think it was done and who did it?" Stone said this in a talk with The Times-Picayune's David Baron for a story that appeared in "Lagniappe."

But if Stone is going to use Garrison as his "dramatic vehicle," doesn't he have an obligation to show that his hero has some flaws and definitely made some "mistakes"? It's true he's not making a documentary, but if he centers his story around Garrison, then he should tell at least some of the truth on both sides.

Maybe Stone can "forget the mistakes," but people who covered the 1969 trial can't. Like the testimony of a major witness, Charles Spiesel. Even Garrison, in his book, "On the Trail of the Assassins," describes Spiesel's statements as "genuine lunatic testimony."

Spiesel, an impressive-looking man, testified that on a trip to New Orleans, he heard Shaw and David Ferrie, another figure in the investigation, discussing the possible assassination of Kennedy at Lafitte's Blacksmith Shop. Wow!, reporters thought. Dynamite testimony.

But on cross-examination, it developed that Spiesel had a little problem. He thought New York police and others were hypnotizing him, putting thoughts into his mind. And, yes, it was true that he fingerprinted his own daughter when she came home from college. Just to make sure she was who she said she was.

Garrison, in his book, blames James Alcock, an assistant DA, for putting Spiesel on the stand. Garrison says he didn't even interview the man.

But the fact that Garrison would be so careless in his investigation as to put a nut on the stand was enough to taint the trial. That and the fact that another prosecution witness, Vernon Bundy, was shooting up on heroin at the time he claims to have seen Shaw and Lee Harvey Oswald together on the lakefront seawall. In his book, Garrison calls the Spiesel testimony "the bomb that shattered our case."

It's not surprising that a jury of ordinary people — not a one of them from the villainous CIA, FBI, the military-industrial complex, the Kennedy family or the media — found Shaw not guilty.

But Clay Shaw's life was ruined and he died in 1974 of lung cancer, a broken man.

Just a glancing reference to some of this might give Stone's movie some credibility, since he is dealing with history. But don't wait for it when you see the movie. Stone admits that he doesn't intend to show Garrison "in a realistic light."

It's the same question raised about such movies as "Blaze" and "Mississippi Burning." Does a moviemaker have an obligation to tell the basic truth about a situation that actually happened?

The Stone movie is more important than the other two movies, because he is going to be talking about whether we can trust our government to find out the truth about the assassination of an American president. This is a serious question.

In this case, it's pretty obvious that the government early in the game didn't really want to know the truth. The Warren Commission's hasty investigation and its conclusion that Oswald was the lone assassin are wide open to question, almost beyond belief. Garrison at least was trying to learn the truth. He may have had hold of a piece of it, or perhaps he stumbled onto a separate conspiracy. If only that point is made about Garrison, then there's no reason to quarrel with the movie version.

But if Stone is going to make Garrison a hero and gloss over the fact he may have put an innocent man on trial for the crime of the century with shoddy evidence or no evidence at all, then the rest of Stone's movie is suspect. Interesting, maybe, but not worthy of the serious intent Stone claims to have.

Like the movie about Blaze Starr, it may be fun to see, but we can't take it seriously.

Iris Kelso is a staff writer.